The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

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DEAR MEMBER,

The Prime Minister told us in his broadcast that the present occasion is one on which we may show, " as so often in our long story, that we can meet reverses with dignity and with renewed accessions of strength." We can find a meaning in these words at two different levels. At the natural level they remind us of the dogged quality of our people, bred in us by we do not know what influences of environment, climate and history—the quality of showing our best when our backs are to the wall, the capacity to lose every battle but the last. This heritage and tradition, which is a gift from the past—in the religious view a gift from God—is a reservoir from which we may certainly draw " renewed accessions of strength."

But is that enough, or must we probe deeper ? There is another view which emerged more than two thousand years ago in the teaching of the Hebrew prophets. It has temporarily lost its hold over the minds of men but is none the less an imperishable possession of mankind. On this view human strength is insufficient. It is liable to corruption and decay. Accessions of strength must come from a source beyond man. History is the inexorable working out of moral laws which are the ultimate truth of life. Calamity, in this view, is a means of opening men's eyes to their real condition.

Sir Stafford Cripps has told us that since his return to this country he has had the feeling that we are not " all out " in our effort and determination in the same way as the Russians. A long despatch from the correspondent of *The Times* in Batavia makes it plain that moral failure was a contributory cause of our defeats in Malaya. It is not for us to blame those who proved unequal to the test ; their weaknesses reflect those of the nation as a whole. In a serious hour we must face the truth about ourselves. There is no need to write again of the deeds of heroism of which we are proud or of the services that are being given with unstinted devotion. But it is just these that may be rendered vain by a moral rottenness that is sapping our strength. There are far too many who, because they have lost faith in something greater than themselves that commands their utmost, have come to think only of what they can get out of life rather than of what they can put into it. Blinding selfishness, weakening self-indulgence, the refusal of responsibility, discipline and concentration are infirmities for which a fearful price may have to be paid. Repentance is a word that has dropped out of the vocabulary of many ; it is something of which they feel no need. But the literal truth stares us in the face, that unless we repent, the nation may perish.

That is the truth at one level. If we want victory, we must pull up our socks. But the prophets go deeper. They called people to repent not for the sake of any immediate advantage, but because only so could they put themselves right with the ultimate truth of things. If they did that, they could trust the future to God.

YOUTH MOVEMENTS IN FRANCE

The contrast between the partial freedom of the unoccupied zone of France and the state of servitude in the occupied zone is apparent in the fate of youth movements in the two areas. In occupied France all branches of the Scout movement (Catholic, Protestant and undenomina-

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tional) have been suppressed. The German authorities have consistently attempted to impose a single state-operated youth organisation. The chief opposition to this policy has come from the Cardinals and Archbishops of the occupied zone, who demanded last July that the independence of the Catholic youth movements should be " energetically maintained." This action met with a sharp rebuke from the propaganda chief in the Paris youth paper *Jeunesse*, where it was maintained that the Church should be content with liberty in the spiritual sphere. The protest of the Cardinals was supported by *Le Temps* which declared that, although France might be an anti-clerical nation, she was fundamentally a Christian nation, and would not consent to level out youth completely by giving it " the single religion of the State," which would be to create a sort of secular theocracy.

The Vichy Government has followed a different policy with happier results. Immediately after the armistice M. Pétain announced that the existing youth movements would be maintained and their individuality respected. These include the various Scout movements affiliated under the *Bureau Interfédéral du Scoutisme*, with a total membership at the end of 1941 of 110,000, and the Catholic youth movements grouped in the *Association Catholique de la Jeunesse Française*, including the *Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne* with 140,000 members, which works actively among the unemployed.

Since the armistice two new youth movements have come into being in unoccupied France. One is the *Chantiers de la Jeunesse*. Under the terms of the armistice, France had immediately to demobilise all the young men of twenty who had just been called up. These, of whom there were about 100,000, were drafted into *groupements*, each subdivided into twelve camps of 200 men. The aim of the training is to combine physical training with national service in the form of forest work, building, swamp clearing, and similar undertakings. It is now compulsory for every Frenchman in unoccupied France, Algeria and the colonies to spend eight months of his twentieth year in the *Chantiers*.

The other new movement is a voluntary one and resembles the Scouts in its general organisation. It is known as the *Compagnons de France*. It is interdenominational and strongly nationalist. Its rallying cry is " France," and its members take an oath of allegiance to the service of their country. There are autonomous companies which take complete charge of young unemployed men and provide them with food, housing and pocket money in return for their work, and there are *compagnies de cité* for working boys in their spare time. There are also mobile squads which do harvesting or undertake the technical work of men who are prisoners of war, and the cultural side of their activities includes folk dancing, musical entertainments and a troup of strolling players. The *Compagnons de France* have the authoritative backing of the Vichy Government and are for this reason frowned on by the German Government and banned in the occupied zone.

Only one-seventh of the youth of France are members of any of these youth movements, and to supply the needs of the others the government is planning to set up a *Maison de Jeunesse* in every village. There are few movements for girls. Girls are specifically encouraged to take up domestic pursuits and to revive cottage industries in their spare time.

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

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PRIVATE DUTY AND PUBLIC SERVICE

By HENRY BROOKE, M.P.

You can always raise a laugh against the Mayor and Corporation. In a changing world, this reaction does not change. Everyone is ready to see the mayor as pompous, aldermen as corpulent, councillors as extravagant, obtuse, self-important or prosy. It is also normally assumed that they will all be elderly. In churches, prayers are said for Parliament as for an honourable institution. How many churches are there where regular reference, not only on high occasions when the Mayor attends in state, is made to the local elected Council as a body whose work similarly deserves the supporting interest, the thoughts and the prayers of the Christian congregation assembled? The Churches collectively are ready—though some say, too ready—to speak in the name of God commending or rebuking particular secular activities of different kinds. Here is one which they commonly ignore, wide and deep though its influence may be on the social environment in which the spiritual life of their people, and of all people, must be lived.

Part of the cause is historical, no doubt. The traditions and the forms of service in church or chapel crystallised many years before local government had, except in some cities and ancient boroughs, taken anything like its present shape, or had gained its now innumerable points of contact with the daily life of almost every man, woman and child. Nor would it be in the least degree fair to single out those who call themselves Christians as specially guilty of negligence in this matter. If the blame resting on them is greater, that is solely because their standard of interest in their fellow-men should be higher. With local exceptions, disregard of the duty of making any but a financial contribution to the essential and fundamentally human work of local government is widespread and lamentable. There are a thousand who will complain (in peace-time) about the kind of Council houses that are being put up, or (in war-time) about the badness of the Council's salvage collection, for every one who is prepared to contemplate the possibility of going on to the Council himself or herself and thereby assuming responsibility for doing something about it.

This is not a condition to acquiesce in. One cannot dismiss it all as a parish-pump affair. It may—or may not—be far removed from matters of duty towards God, but it springs from a popular state of mind evidencing a cruelly low conception of duty towards neighbours. So long as such features persist, Christian thought is not adequately doing the work of leaven in public life.

TIME TO ACT

For several reasons it is timely to consider all this now. The war has shaken the kaleidoscope, and the pieces have not settled into any new pattern yet ; there is still time to do something towards determining that, for rigidity has given way to flux, and, at any rate in affairs institutional, sheer rigidity is the most killing weapon in the devil's armoury. For many years we in this country have been drawing closer to the crisis of a problem in democratic government which we have so far failed to solve. It is this. How are those who are best fitted to participate in the active work of democracy, and contribute to its successful functioning, to be enabled to find the necessary time?

Fortunately women are coming forward in increasing numbers to take a share, but they cannot shoulder the whole of the work, and it would be obviously wrong that they should be asked to do so. The number of men not subject to any degree of economic pressure, and therefore rich in time for public service, is dwindling. A single man need work less hard in self-support than a married man, and therefore can afford to devote a higher proportion of his income-earning capacity to non-income-earning purposes. But neither reason nor public opinion would welcome with approval the idea of handing over the

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task of government exclusively to women, to elderly people who have retired, and to the childless and the unmarried—or, infinitely worse, to those who are ready to do it because they see financial or professional advantage in it. Yet that is the end to which we are drifting, and there is going to be a race between the speed of the drift and the growth of public awareness that some positive action must be taken to set up a fresh course. Pericles, interpreting the Athens of his time, said :—" It is true that we are called a democracy, for the administration is in the hands of the many and not of the few. But while the law secures equal justice to all alike for their private disputes, the claim of excellence is also recognised, and when a citizen is in any way distinguished he is preferred to the public service not as a matter of privilege but as the reward of merit. Neither is poverty a bar, but a man may benefit his country whatever the obscurity of his condition." In the modern world we are not on an equality with this noble boast. We may actually be dropping away from it. Unless we take special thought we shall let slip any chance of attaining to its realisation, and of doing what lies in us to make merit the determinant.

As proof that all this line of argument is not mere subjective pessimism, I remember hearing an experienced Regional Commissioner say how surprised and troubled he had been to find that throughout the urban parts of his Region hardly any of the type of people who struck him as the natural leaders for local government were in fact taking any part in it. It was not that their party was out of office—indeed, the people he had in mind belonged to more parties than one—but rather that the conduct of local affairs had settled into other hands, and they left it at that. This adds one more element to the here-and-now opportunity. The efficiency or otherwise of the Civil Defence organisation, and of all that came to be known as the " post-blitz " services, has touched the mass of the people closely, has stirred local opinion and has found prominence in the local press. All or nearly all these services and arrangements are the direct responsibility of the local Councils. Air attack drove home the truth, rarely grasped before, that to have useless people on the Council, instead of the best men and women in the town, from whatever section they might come, was a mistake that had to be paid for in needless misery. By contrast, those who had taken public office not for private reasons, but through real civic loyalty and a desire to see difficult jobs well done, gained a recognition which might never have come to them in peace-time. The idea of public service has taken a wider hold, particularly among thinking Civil Defence workers of all classes, because so many have seen for themselves, perhaps for the first time, how much it matters.

A PART FOR EVERYONE

If then it is true that in this field of public representation we have arrived at a kind of watershed, where new streams are forming and may flow in any direction, it becomes the more important that those whose values are Christian values should keep their eyes open to the whole scene and their minds alive to every development. It is no more the duty of everyone to enter public life at some level, than it is of every Christian to be ordained. But just as the work of a Church will be damaged if no bridge of mutual understanding is built across the dyke which divides clergy and laity, so there will be much effort and many an opportunity wasted if an understanding respect for the tasks and the non-material potentialities of public work is not inculcated as one of the duties of a Christian citizen. Some who would not otherwise have done so must be inspired to take part in it themselves ; that is the direct contribution which must be made to its quality. But almost all can help by taking a more intelligent interest in one branch or another of local administration near their home : by obtaining from the Town Hall or Council Offices the latest report of the Medical Officer of Health, to which every ratepayer is entitled : by taking personal trouble to learn more about the local school or housing estate or day nursery or infant welfare clinic : by following Council affairs in the local paper, and by sometimes exercising the right of a citizen to go and listen to meetings of the Council.

There are barriers to direct participation, some of them inherent in the democratic system ; and as one of the reasons we are fighting a war is to preserve that, it would be dishonest to wish that in essentials it were other than it is. One of the essentials is free election, and free election means the splashing of some mud. But popular ideas exaggerate the seriousness and the extent of the ordeal by mud, and those whose reputations are soundest have least to fear from it.

A difficulty which deserves more real

respect is the penetration of our public life by the party system. Those especially who from the highest motives wish to play a part in it will be most disposed to doubt whether integrity of mind and purpose is compatible with party affiliation. Maybe the answer will be different in different places. There is little to be said for reaching a theoretical conclusion not based on real inquiry or experience, and then clinging to that as the whole truth. To eschew public work on the ground that no party seems wholly worthy may be not purity but priggishness. Widely practised, it would lead to the extraordinary phenomenon of Christian people, in a nation that claims to be Christian, deliberately and in the name of their religion leaving all important decisions of government in the hands of non-Christians exclusively. The trained élite of Plato's ideal state would not, he foresaw, freely desire to break away from the contemplation of absolute good when they were called back to take up their mundane duties of governing ; but if they refused, they would by their own act be condemning the state to be ruled by men less able than themselves to govern well.

After this present war, whenever plans for reconstruction go awry, as many of them will, and when criticism is voiced in the name of Christian ideals against their failure, it will be for the critics to probe the extent of their own responsibility also. In these war years, with the way of entry to local government smoother than ever before—for Council elections are suspended by law, and all vacancies are being filled by co-option—how much are we doing ourselves to make sure that the opportunity is not neglected, and that men and women of the right quality are coming forward, or are being brought forward, to step into the empty places which death and retirement are constantly creating? How many sincere Christian people, who care passionately that the Parliament of their country should show itself in debate and action not unworthy of their highest hopes, are actively concerning themselves to see that candidates who will strengthen and not weaken the House of Commons in that sense are selected for the vacancies, occurring now at the rate of one a fortnight, and filled mostly without election because of the party truce ? If charged with neglect on that score, would it be a valid and complete defence for a layman to reply, " My first step would have had to be to take an interest in the local branch or association of a political party in the constituency where I live, and I could not bring myself to that " ?

It may be contended with deep conviction that all this is unrelated to Christianity—that the field of religion is one, and the field of public affairs is another. I am not wise enough to say. This Supplement has not been written to ask for a quick acceptance that the ideas put forward are either true or relevant ; the argument is, rather, that they deserve thought from a Christian starting-point, because these are matters which few would maintain are being wholly managed well, and it may turn out to be that just this kind of interest has been the chief deficiency.

THE FUTURE OF VOLUNTARY ENTERPRISE

But the issue would be unduly narrowed if it were looked at in connection with representative government alone. It crops out over almost the whole range of voluntary bodies and societies, this country's peculiar pride. They face a similar crisis. Numbers of these societies have been living on a tradition—living on it, and not revitalising it. These are blunt words, and fortunately there are many exceptions which can locally disprove them. But how many voluntary organisations have adequately faced the necessity for arranging a constant flow of new blood to their governing bodies ? The lack of time for such work presses just as hard here as in municipal service. The work may grow, but the leisured class diminishes. It was the public conscience of that class to which very many of these societies owed their origin, and unless they take stock of the situation created by its rapid disappearance and plan their own adaptation, their work may suffer, their prestige may suddenly be found as iridescent and as empty as a bubble, and all that was splendid and all that was not so splendid in them may alike be left high and dry by a tide that has ebbed.

It is unfair to make these brutal suggestions without citing evidence, and for that we each of us can only go to personal experience. I have seen health and welfare services carried on by voluntary bodies, not from lack of funds but from lack of standards, in conditions which an efficient local authority would not tolerate. Though I believe the finest elementary schools in the country to be some of the Church schools, as a manager of more than one Church school in the past I have been shocked by remarks of fellow-managers which disclosed insulting ignorance

of the quality of religious teaching given in many Council schools. Within the last few years—and this I believe to be the basic defect, which it is a pressing duty to make good—I have known of one society or institution after another, controlled by a governing body whose high average age rendered it unable, for all its sincere desire, to keep sufficient touch with the developing ideas of those whose lives it was bound to affect and whose problems it might need to unravel. This is not a plea for youth as such against age as such, but for the constant representation of all ages on bodies which carry responsibility.

If it is argued that men and women of the right outlook can seldom nowadays be found to fill the vacant places, and that therefore effort to discover them is doomed to failure, this is defeatism ; let us be frank about it. If the voluntary organisations, many of them, are not reinvigorated to grapple with the changing world after the war, their plight will be sorry. If the followers of Him who told the story of the Good Samaritan do not accept the task and make it a point of principle to raise every voluntary body in their own neighbourhood clear of reproach, whose task shall it be ?

PERSONAL READINESS

But if this exertion is confined to those free institutions, and the same kind of active interest and readiness to participate is not extended to elected representative bodies, the work is only half done. It needs to be approached humbly, too, and not with the naïve assurance of a missionary who is blind to his own inexperience. Imagination may often be lacking, but the operation of democratic government in this country, whether local or national, rests upon a vast deposit of good sense. I sometimes wish that those who in some better-deserving cause address to members of Parliament menacing questionnaires or memorials, breathing the very essence of intolerance and conveying that a negative answer will be a betrayal of all that is holy, could learn the lesson so well taught by the House of Commons that men you utterly disagree with deserve your respect because the opinions they express are sincere, and could watch vehement opponents on the floor of the House having tea together later in the smoking-room, not unwilling to recognise that they are both colleagues in a national assembly far greater than either of them.

The responsibilities confronting our democratic institutions, headed by Parliament, are only less mountainous than the tasks confronting the Churches. It is at least possible that each might be brought to give larger help to the other in purposes that are common to both. But if that is to be, it cannot be ensured by committees or resolutions. The initiative, as in so much else, lies with individuals.

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